Be adventurous with the Bible

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Introduction: Luther being adventurous with the bible 490 years ago

Being adventurous with the bible seems quite an appropriate topic for a conference taking place in the 21st century and thinking about new horizons in children's ministry. It implies leaving old-fashioned ways of dealing with the bible behind, starting something new, especially when it comes to working with children." I said: Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side."

I am probably going to disappoint you a little now: Looking at the biblical work, for me one of the greatest, if not the greatest adventurer with the bible was no other than Martin Luther. His idea of reforming the church had much to do with a new approach to the bible. We probably all know quite a bit about his bible translation into German. An interesting bit of information which is not so well-known: It was also Luther, who published the first kind of "children's bible" in 1529. We owe this slightly hidden aspect to American literature scientist Ruth Bottigheimer.[1] Luther adds his "Passional" to his "Betbüchlein" - preaching booklet which he published since 1522 in many editions. It consists of 50 woodcuts which were to illustrate 50 important biblical texts from creation to the sending of the disciples. And moreover, in the introduction Luther is clear about the aim of this new genre: "I adjudge good to put the old passional to the preaching booklet at the very most for the children's and simple-minded sake who will be moved better to keep in mind the divine stories by image and parable than by mere word or lesson as St. Mark witnessed that also Christ was preaching parables for the simple-minded sake."
Luther was an inventor and thereby an adventurer: trying something new with the bible as he knew it and as he loved it. Maybe we might also say: Because he loved it, he became adventurous.
And this is, what probably all of you share with Luther: Most probably, everyone of you, gathering here at this ECCE has been an adventurer with the bible yourself: Since you love these biblical stories, since you are fascinated by their strength and power you probably have already gone beyond old-fashioned ways to read them. You have exceeded the ways that you dealt with the bible before when sharing it with children.
So what am I going to do here this morning with you adventure experts? I understand my role as to explore and analyze together with you what we find already in terms of biblical adventures and to initiate some ideas for your work. The focus, of course, lies on working with children.

The outline of my presentation derives from the title that I was given. Be adventurous with the bible. I want to explore this imperative with you part by part. A first short passage refers to the "Be", a second longer passage takes a look at "with the bible" and at the end I am going to deal with the "adventurous".

[1] Cf. Bottigheimer 1990.

1. BE adventurous with the bible

Let us start with the "Be". Be adventurous. It is a demand. That is pretty clear. But: Who is prompted? Who is the addressee?
Since it is the topic for our convention we might figure right away: It is us. *We* are invited to be adventurous. We, adults, grown-ups, who all have our different places in children's ministry, in schools, youth groups or in church boards. We are supposed to be adventurous with the bible in favor of children or youth benefitting from our effort.
Of course, this is true. But from how I understand, this is *one* dimension. Maybe, you see it as a matter of course but still the second perspective is threatened to get lost: The title also addresses children themselves. As the rather recent field of research on children's theology points out: Children are theological subjects. We owe this approach to a great extend to Maria Montessori, even though she did not develop it for religious education in particular. "Help me to do it myself." This famous sentence in which Montessori describes the children's expectation, points out: Children are not only to be understood as receivers and learners of biblical and theological insights that we present to them. They are also the ones doing theology themselves already. In our times, the approach of children's theology picked up and continued Montessori's idea. It contains the dimensions of theology of children, with children, for children.[2] You have already heard a lot about it from Angela Kunze-Beiküfner on Tuesday.
With respect to reading, understanding, interpreting the bible this approach reminds us: Even though there have been so many scholars already doing biblical theological work for us and we figure there are no questions left, it is still worthwhile to remain open for new perspectives and ideas of others and of children in particular.
So, the first insight is: Children might feel invited to take a walk on the wild side as well - and they might even lead us adventurous paths we would not have found without them.
To be clear, I am far from romanticizing this second perspective or prefer it. With this first small passage I only want you to become aware of you own self-conception: Do you see yourself as the adventurer who then brings adventurous ideas to the kids? Or are you encouraging the children to be adventurous themselves and bring their ideas to you? Both perspectives have their time: I would not argue for the latter alone. There will be situations in which children come to adventurous yet destructive or scary ideas of the biblical stories that move too far from our Christian message. I am coming back to this later, when we are talking about some criteria for this notion of "too far".

2. Be adventurous WITH THE BIBLE

Before we are coming to this, I have to address another part of the title. Be adventurous WITH THE BIBLE.
On the first sight this is a very clear statement. Of course: THE bible. I suspect most of you know already which question I am heading to: Which bible?

[2] Cf. Kraft / Schreiner 2007.

When it comes to adults' bibles church officials and boards endlessly discuss about which translation is appropriate or which goes too far to be used in a regular Sunday Service. They ponder which one can be used at all or which has to be handled quite carefully. They also spend a lot of money for good translations. It took years until the new "Luther-Bible" in Germany was ready in 2017 with many, many biblical scholars involved.
When it comes to children's bibles: Honestly, nobody from the official church leaders or boards really cares. Nobody asks which children's bible you use for your services or school lessons. And if we find many different adult's bibles already, the existing variety of children's bibles is much, much wider. Especially in the last decade there was an enormous increase of publications.[3] The amount of adventure in them differs. Some seem to have intended to be adventurous obviously. So, before you start being adventurous with the bible we need to be aware that the bibles you use are already more or less adventurous endeavors. This can certainly relieve you for you don't have to do everything yourselves. Yet, you do have to be careful: Quite many of children's bibles are adventurous but unfortunately not only a few of them are, I dare to say: risky!
I will give you a brief overview of how you can differentiate and categorize children's bibles and estimate their "adventure-factor".

2. Cateogrize the existing adventures: Translations, publications, sets of biblical stories
In the more recent years, biblical researchers have started to study the variety of bibles for children. The categories of Michael Fricke are some of the most detailed but also the most helpful.[4] He has identified eight different types of children's bibles:

1. Biblical picture books (dominating pictures, little text)
2. Learning bibles or commentary bibles (text oriented at the original text with theological pedagogically motivated insights)
3. Story bibles, offering a simplified text mainly without interpretations.
4. Story bibles, presenting the text more openly in specific theological or storytelling perspectives
5. Story bibles, working with a fictional framework
6. Bible fiction, presenting the biblical text in a new context for the sake of dramaturgy.
7. Biblical comics
8. Selective bibles, close to the adult text but written for youth.

From these categories you can already sense the different amount of adventure in the bibles: Some closer to the text, some rather free, imaginative. Some invent frameworks, some rather focus on illustration.

Cross cutting these styles, Fricke considers five different aims of children's bibles. What they are heading at:

[3] Cf. Reents / Melchior 2001, 647f.: Since the 16th century about 1000 children's bibles have been published. About 200 have been published in the new millennium.
[4] Fricke 2015.

1. Leading children to Christian faith
2. Helping them to understand better their heritage of language and culture.
3. Offering incentives to adults and children to think about theological and ethical questions of life.
4. Leading children to the „full, complete“ bible.
5. „Edutainment“

And finally, according to the mentioned aims we find children's bibles

1. to read yourself,
2. to be read out or to be told
3. to be the basis for (educational) talks in family, parish or school.

To be clear: None of the presented differentiations tells us something about the theological quality of the bibles. There can be good and not so good (and bad…) versions in all kinds of styles and aims.

2.2 Evaluate the existing adventures: Criteria for theologically sound children's bibles

Without going too much into detail I want to give you at least some hints how to evaluate the theological quality of a children's bible.[5] With regard to our question one could say: this might help you to classify the adventurous endeavors of the biblical authors.

Some important aspects you might want to have a look at:

The superordinate question tends to the set of biblical stories. It differs from bible to bible. There are some stories being apparently set, like creation, Noah's ark, the story of nativity or some parables. Other stories often don't appear - some because they might be boring to children (lets talk about the book of Numbers), some because they seem inappropriate (sacrifice of Isaac). And this is the interesting part to discover: What is considered inappropriate, unnecessary, too cruel, and why? Which agenda do you find behind the author's selection? Is it clear and open to the readers (or their parents or teachers) or is it hidden?

Within this fundamental question of story selection there are three aspects that deserve to be mentioned:

1. Images of God:

It is good to have a look at the images of God presented. Does the bible mirror a plurality of images or does it foster a narrowed understanding? How does it cope with the "dark sides" of God? Of course: Images of God also include images of Jesus Christ: Do e.g. the human and godly nature appear in equal measures?[6]

2. Justice issues:

Justice issues have got more attention in the last decades, and rightly so: In most cases, bibles for children contain about 30% first testament, 70% second testament, vice versa to the full bible.

[5] Lauter-Pohl 2003

[6] Cf. Klöpper 2003, Dohmen 2006.

Diana Klöpper and Kerstin Schiffner have tackled that challenge and published a bible with "original" proportions, also being sensitive to questions of Christian-Jewish dialogue.[7] Besides, how do the authors deal with gender issues, in terms of language and in terms of biblical women or perspectives?[8]

3. Illustration:
Talking about the biblical illustrations and artwork might be the most important part.[9]
There is an old movie theatre in St. Moritz in Switzerland. At one outside wall there is huge lettering: "The picture always has the final say." How true: Sciences have proven our vision to be by far the most important sense for our perception, for our understanding and evaluation. Long before you hear or read about a text the images presented influence your hearing, thinking, feeling and understanding (by the way: this is true also for the persons who present the whole thing to you).
Children's bibles are full of pictures and images, artwork and sometimes photography. It is one of their main features and characteristics. Remember the beginning: It was Luther's starting point. He was highlighting the importance of visual approaches to the biblical stories for children.
Of course, illustration, pictures and artwork are always a question of taste and personal visual habits. Yet, we can ask on the one hand, if the pictures are adequate for the respective target group: e.g. toddlers, older children, teenagers.
On the other hand, maybe even more important and challenging: The illustrators are quite powerful because their theological presentations are of course interpretations. And these interpretations reach children right away and might deeply influence their understanding of the story.
So, besides questions of taste we should carefully analyze: What is the theological proposition of the text (and who decides on that?!) and does the illustration conform with it? This does not mean: The illustration only shows exactly what the text says. Much more inspiring can be those images, which foster a personal approach to the story or encourage children to take a personal stance on the text.

It is quite interesting to see the change of adventures in children's bibles throughout the years and decades but for today I will have to leave it at that. We can keep in mind: Even though you can, of course, find marks of social developments, of "Zeitgeist" and theological emphases in the different translations of adult's bibles as well, I dare to say: Children's bibles reflect these developments way more because there is so much individual translation and interpretation included all the time.
Talking about our title we can conclude: Many authors have been quite adventurous with the biblical texts and stories. It is a rather recent development that the authors or researchers reflect on these adventures, and especially on the theological and pedagogical agendas underneath.

3. Be ADVENTUROUS with the bible

[7] Cf. Klöpper / Schiffner 2004; Taschner 2003.
[8] Cf. Schiffner 2003, Baum-Resch 2006.
[9] Cf. Rosenau 2006.

In this last part we are not so much looking at the bibles published. I will rather ask: What do **you** have to take into account being adventurous yourself? What kind of adventures can we try out nowadays? And at the end, I am trying to sketch some guidelines for our discussion.

3.1 The fine line: Adventurous - not foolish

In order to find a way how to be adventurous without being foolish or losing track we need some framing.

a) Be adventurous doing justice to the text

Quite often when we work with the biblical text and especially when we recur on it for ethical orientation, we need to be able to give account for our approach. We saw that already before with regard to children's bibles and their authors but it is true for our own work as well.

We can take up the standards mentioned: The variety of images of God and Jesus or justice issues connected with our Jewish ancestors or a diverse culture.

For sure: It is tempting to simply recur on given concepts, to always retell the biblical stories as we heard them ourselves when we were young.

And it is tempting to simply use prefab punch lines.

I realize how difficult it is to leave the beaten tracks. Not least as it requires thorough theological work. Some of you producing material for children's ministry will know. Yet, it also remains our all task to have a critical look at ideas and maybe change them if we are not content e.g. with biased language or blind spots. And thinking of the "Be"-Part at the beginning: We can also encourage children to become sensitive to these kinds of things.

Another challenge: There are stories in the bible which we cannot whitewash. We cannot satisfactorily explain them by referring to translation errors or blind spots of the ancient writers. There are texts that remain uncomfortable and painful because they seem to contradict our "Christian intuition". We do not want to take them as literally as other verses. Is it arbitrary to leave them out or preach against them? I don't think so.

Because - and this has become important to me for my theological and ethical work - I am convinced: I can rank and value biblical messages. Some have greater value for our Christian beliefs than others. For some are closer and some are more distant to the biblical keynote which is God's loving and forgiving faithfulness. Texts which are excluding, judging people are far away from this keynote message.

b) Be adventurous doing justice to children

Besides doing justice to the text we also need to do justice to our given audience and our present times. Especially looking back at our history of biblical adventures we can see that not a few adults used biblical stories for their educational agenda.

There is a joke about children's ministry. Maybe you know it:

> *Always at the end of the children's service, there is no money in the offering. Obviously one of kids is stealing it. The next Sunday, the pastor puts a little note in the basket*

before passing it around. It says "God sees everything." After the service the basket returns empty again except for another little note, saying: "But he won't tell…"

God sees everything… An old educational agenda.

It was an attempt some decades ago, especially in the 40s and 50s[10] to use and change the text in order to strengthen the parents' authority and teach children obedience. Maybe, some of you still recall themselves stories that made you feel scared or guilty. How about the parables? Which versions do you remember?

- The sheep gets lost because it was not obedient to the shepherd. Or: the shepherd looks after his lost sheep.
- The elder brother was obedient to his father but the younger was not an obedient boy and causes his father grief. Or: the father is forgiving by any means.
  (The first versions I actually copied from famous Anne de Vries bible, having affected many of us for ages.)

Disturbing "adventures" that made you come back differently for sure - thank you for nothing. Luckily enough, these approaches are really outdated. Yet, the challenge remains to not have your own educational agenda dominate the biblical text and the children. What are you going to emphasize? It is also a very personal adventure to have a close look at your own favorite texts or blind spots, messages which you like to tell over and over again and things you are scared to talk about with children.

3.2 How to… Some best-practice ideas

Let's have a look at some methods and ideas how to become adventurous with the bible.

1) Telling: with and without music

Just briefly: Telling the stories with your own words is probably the most common way. I gave you some ideas already framing that adventure. And of course: Singing hymns and songs telling biblical stories is another way which often goes straight to your heart, combining melody and meaning.

2) Creating

All kinds of creative activities can transform the text into a piece of art (clay, natural material, drawings, etc.). I personally have found another way of bible adventure for myself and for my parish. I discovered the showcase at our church wall to be a perfect spot to invite people to hold on a minute for some biblical input. It is completely analogue with limited space but reaching so many people, adults and children. This is a bible adventure with open end because I really don't know what it moves in people and I rarely have a chance to talk about it with them.

Such creative ways of dealing with biblical stories can of course only mirror certain aspects, snapshots, quite different from our usual way of explaining and interpreting. However, it is always amazing to see which aspects, sometimes really tiny bits of the stories, gain in importance.

[10] Cf. Dohmen-Funke 2006, 11-18.

3) Playing: Godly Play, Nativity Plays, Radieschenfieber

Playing with the story can be part of the adventures as well. So, Jerome Berryman was an adventurer, inventing Godly Play.[11] Giving a lot of space to the biblical story, let it shine without an added "sermon" after "today's reading". Making the story visible, touchable with fascinating insights we would not get without the material. In Godly Play, the biblical story suddenly appears somehow mysterious because it is unfolded like a treasure: Adventures and treasures go along well. It would be interesting to hear from you, especially from the Godly Play instructors among you how you perceive the "adventure factor" today: High or low? Is there a notion of adventure for you or much more solid ground with very clear structures, prefab stories and actually clear outcomes despite of "I wonder" questions? Since I have heard different perspectives until now, I am interested in yours.

Most likely, the favorite playing adventure in our parishes is the Christmas story of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. Generation by generation, children, youth, adults play the same scene. And it is not getting boring somehow because there is something new about it every year. A certain highlight, a certain figure we have a closer look at, a certain bridge to our life. The congregation always thinks it knows the story already but then discovers something new. On the other hand: This can also be one of the situations in church when people (adults more than children…) become grumpy not to hear and see exactly the same story. You might have your own interesting experiences. And we may ask: Are there stories that we should not be too adventurous with?

And at the end an adventurous guy, I want you to get to know. Some of you might know him already: Radieschenfieber[12], "radish fever", an idea of Matthias Jungermann. His approach is to use all kinds of everyday stuff to explore biblical ideas and try something new (quite often also very funny) with the text to make it come alive. It works for children and adults. And what I like about him: He encourages all of us to copy his approach. No copyright, no certificates, more adventure. I brought you a video that we can watch in a minute before we go into discussion. For now, I want to conclude with five guidelines to keep or to discuss afterwards:

[11] Berryman 2006, 110-131.
[12] www.radieschenfieber.de

3.3 Five guidelines for your adventure
Be adventurous…

1) **…but don't suggest to be the only tour guide!**
   Remain open for others' insights and proposals of methods, especially for those of children and so called "non-theologians".
2) **…but know about it yourself and care about your companions!**
   Keep on self-reflecting honestly on possible hidden agendas. Be transparent about your own uncertainties and doubts. Be aware which interpretations might have scary or destructive impacts on children.
3) **…and bring a compass or map!**
   Be able to explain your selection of biblical texts. Include biblical-historical exegesis and avoid to fall back into traditional, conventional schemes. Stay connected to the middle of scripture, the keynote of God's loving and forgiving faithfulness.
4) **…again!**
   Include different methods in your adventure. Always the same method in approaching the biblical texts can reduce the output and narrow your and the children's view.
5) **but remember that the adventure's success is not only up to you!**
   Some adventures are quite hidden, taking place inside of you, in your hearts and minds and souls. They may start when reading the old text at a new stage of life or listening to it in a different translation. Perhaps, this sounds somehow boring but to me it is one of the discoveries: Biblical texts move and touch me differently in life. And we may trust this is true for children as well.

I now invite you to relax. We started with the publican Zachaeus this morning. We end with the publican Levi - and with Radieschenfieber!

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